

ROBERT W. GARRITY

Interviewed by: Patrick Nieburg

Initial interview date: March 1989

Copyright 2007 ADST

GARRITY: My Vietnam experience was my first assignment with USIA. I came to the agency in 1965, after a three-week orientation at the State Department on Vietnam, was assigned to Vietnam. I arrived there in early September, 1965. I was there from September, '65 until early May, 1967, when I was transferred to Munich - although I actually left Saigon on orders to Vienna, which caused quite a sensation because nobody had ever received orders to Vienna from Saigon before.

After two and a half years as Amerika Haus Director in Munich, I went to Iceland, as Public Affairs Officer for three years. I left there in 1973, in the summer; probably the only person in history to be transferred from Iceland to Hawaii - at least with USIA.

I spent three years in Hawaii as Advisor to CINCPAC (Commander in Chief, Pacific). That was followed by a year as a Fellow at the Center for International Affairs at Harvard University. Then a year as Policy Officer in Washington, at the old Television and Film Service. Then a year studying Japanese and off to Tokyo, as Deputy Public Affairs officer for four years.

Q: Who was the Public Affairs Officer then?

GARRITY: From 1979 to '81, Clint Forster was the Public Affairs Officer; then for the remaining two years, Dave Hitchcock. I came back to Washington in 1983, and in January of '84, became Director of Foreign Press Centers for the agency. I held that job until I retired in August 1988.

Q: Bob, you are one of the few people who not only had an illustrious career, but who have changed areas - rather violently, if I may say so; from Europe to the Far East, and study at Harvard. How do you feel about your career?

GARRITY: Well, I always say there's a pattern there somewhere, but I've never been able to figure out what it is. I must say, with all of the mayhem in Vietnam, I had more direct exposure to violence when I got to Germany, because of the rather strong anti-Vietnam sentiment expressed by the students at the various universities on a rather constant basis. For that reason, we were unable to have any programs directly identified with Vietnam.

Q: That was in Germany?

GARRITY: That was in Germany.

Q: So your Vietnam experience actually went somewhat for naught, in Germany?

GARRITY: Well, like yourself - not to the extent that you did - but around the Bavarian part of Germany, I did get out and meet with groups. I remember one very funny meeting, as it turned out, with a group of German students who were in a state of high dudgeon over Vietnam and American policy there. When they were sort of pausing for breath, they said, "Oh, by the way, what do American students think of our protest against Vietnam?"

I said, "They don't think anything of it; they don't even know about it. They're too busy protecting themselves." They were quite disappointed; in fact, they were really downcast after that; it took all the starch out of them.

Q: Tell me, you said that your first assignment was Vietnam; what made you leave what you were doing, and what were you doing to join the agency and go to Vietnam?

GARRITY: I had been in the Navy for three years, following college, then worked for Little, Brown and Company in Boston, which was my home town. While I was at Little, Brown and Company - perhaps because of being stationed in Puerto Rico in the Navy - I just felt that was something I should do again. Fortunately, my wife agreed; although she had become a New England housewife by that time.

Nevertheless, we began a career with USIA, having three young children, and not much idea of what we were getting into. We had great assurance from the panel that interviewed us. In those days your wife was interviewed as well as yourself, or your spouse, I should say. We were quite assured that I would never be ordered to Vietnam.

And sure enough, as soon as I was sworn in and was assured of the usual six months of training, everything fell apart. They had an immediate need for someone in Saigon. The training was scrapped, and replaced by a three-week Vietnam orientation course in the State Department; which did nothing but raise doubts, by the way. It certainly didn't reinforce, in any way, an argument for being there.

So we set off for Vietnam, over the agency's assurances that we would never be sent there on a first assignment.

Q: Robert, when you say we, where did Joanne and the children go while you went to Saigon?

GARRITY: Well, I first went down to Washington, and left her in Marlborough, Massachusetts. I called her up and said, "My god, we're supposed to go to Saigon, and we're leaving in three weeks."

She said, "What does that mean?"

I said, "It means you have a choice of going to Hong Kong, or Baguio."

She said, "Baguio, where's that?"

I said, "It's supposed to be a very nice place in the Philippines, or Bangkok." So I said, "You have to decide." I called her back a couple of days later, and she said she had decided. I said, "How did you do it?"

And she said, "I went to the Marlborough library, and I got all the materials on the three places, and decided on Bangkok."

And I said, "Well, did it seem the most comfortable?"

She said, "No, it's the closest." So that was the basis of her decision, and as it turned out, it was a very good decision.

Q: In effect then, did you take Joanne and the children to Bangkok, and get them settled? Or did you go your separate ways?

GARRITY: Well, the agency wanted us to all take a plane that landed in Saigon, and then continued on to Bangkok. I refused to do that. I said I wanted to accompany them to Bangkok, and get them settled. It was the first time overseas. And they said, "Well, you can't do that because you don't have any leave time accumulated."

I said, "Well, that's not my fault. You folks changed the whole schedule." Vietnam threw a lot of agency programs into a tizzy, because of the need for personnel. So they finally agreed to give me a couple of days, and I did get to Bangkok. Somebody had found us an apartment. It was Carol Forte, who was the senior wife among the Saigon widows. She very nicely found us an apartment, which was so far beyond our means that we quickly had to find someplace else, and get it lined up for a move.

I arrived in Saigon five days after we'd landed in Bangkok. I was supposed to replace someone on an emergency basis, and when I got there the person I was supposed to replace - Pete Hickman - announced that he wasn't leaving for another six or eight weeks. I said, "Oh, what happened?"

And he said, "He had won an extension in a poker game with the Public Affairs Officer." He was so reluctant to leave Saigon, that he decided to bet an extension as part of an ante in a poker game, and won.

Q: Who was the Public Affairs Officer then?

GARRITY: That was Barry Zorthian.

Q: Barry was known for the famous poker games.

GARRITY: That's right.

Q: And that was one in which Hickman won an extension, rather than transfer back home?

GARRITY: That's right.

Q: That is fabulous. When was that, in '65?

GARRITY: Right, 1965, in early September. As it turned out, I worked in the JUSPAO Press Center for 89 days. I remember that very clearly. My boss was Harold Kaplan, who was an absolutely superb gentleman, briefer, and head of the Press Center. We also had Bob Levine, or Don - he goes by both; he was on the staff then. It was a very exciting 89 days.

Q: Were you assigned housing, and then what was your assigned job?

GARRITY: I recall staying in a hotel for some weeks, and then eventually shared an apartment with another officer, who was brand new - Mark Crocker. He was very skilled in the language, and had been there in the Army; he was very, very fluent in Vietnamese.

Q: Then what was your assignment, actually, in JUSPAO?

GARRITY: My first assignment was Assistant Press Officer. I remember two major events. One was escorting the press, with Senator Kennedy, who was making a whirlwind trip around the country. It was very exciting, because just as we started out, an unexpected - or at least unannounced - strike, began.

Q: By whom?

GARRITY: By the American forces, with the result that each stop along the way - and there were six of them - we lost our press plane. I recall having to get - six different times - having to beseech the local authorities to give us a plane, to continue on, so that the press could fly with him.

Q: When you say a strike, do you mean military? Not the usual labor strike?

GARRITY: No, a military air strike.

Q: And they preempted your planes for that military strike?

GARRITY: Yes.

Q: But you went in transport planes.

GARRITY: That's right, they needed more transport planes each step along the way. But somehow we managed to procure a replacement.

Q: What areas did you cover? Where did you go on this particular trip? What did they try to show Kennedy?

GARRITY: I remember we went to Ban Me Thuot. I believe on the same trip we went to the province where you were.

Q: Yes, you came to Pleiku; I remember that. But Ban Me Thuot was the former imperial seat, and Bao Dai had a summer, or hunting cottage there. Is that where you stayed?

GARRITY: No, that's not where we stayed, if it's the place I can remember. We went to a Montagnard village, where Senator Kennedy was treated with some rather poisonous rice wine, and made a political speech.

Q: Was it a home-town speech kind of thing, to the troops?

GARRITY: It was a speech to the Montagnards, which none of them understood. They knew the name Kennedy. I had a very strong impression when I first was in Vietnam. The three most famous people in the world, to Vietnamese, were John F. Kennedy, Pope John XXIII, and Ho Chi Minh. Those were the three figures that all Vietnamese seemed to know about.

Q: That, to me, is a very interesting side line, because you went to Ban Me Thuot at the time when the Vietnamese government was the most suspicious of the Montagnard. Prior to that, we'd had some Montagnard uprisings, was that deliberate?

GARRITY: Well, Kennedy had made a specific request to visit a Montagnard village, and every effort was made to accommodate him. And, of course, the fact that this trip was a precedent, and covered by American press, and international press - for the whole two days of the trip.

Q: Do you recall any infamous, or famous names among the press who covered that event?

GARRITY: I'd have to go back and think about that.

Q: But there wasn't a Neil Sheehan, or a chaplain?

GARRITY: I believe one of the people along was Ron Nesson, who later became press secretary to President Ford. Names are starting to come back.

Q: And from Ban Me Thuot you went on to Pleiku, which I remember.

GARRITY: Then we had several stops I cannot remember, but we wound up in Da Nang.

Q: Robert, you said at the beginning that you had 89 days at the Press Center, which was only a very partial time of your entire tour. What happened after the Press Center?

GARRITY: I remember the 89 days because when I suddenly was transferred out of the Press Center, I never got an evaluation for what seemed to be the most exciting 89 days of my entire life up to that point; and I was very chagrined, because it sort of disappeared, and was never recorded.

It was a sudden decision to have a Japanese language-capable officer in the Press Center; and since there was a limit on the number of positions, and I was the newest, I was sent up to become Assistant Publications Officer, and was replaced by Jim Seece, who spoke Japanese.

Q: But before we leave the Press Center, you said that there were two events. One was the Kennedy visit; what was the other?

GARRITY: The other was what became a very famous visit, of ten governors to Vietnam. I was the press escort for the entire trip. Governor Romney was the governor of Michigan at the time, and he is the name that stood out later, when he was running for President. He said of that trip, that he was brainwashed in Vietnam; and it was very amusing having been with him the entire time he was there. I couldn't imagine when it happened, unless it was during his sleep, because being a good politician, he never stopped talking for the entire time he was there, and did very little listening.

Q: Just as a point of interest, Robert, do you recall, were there embassy people going with them? Were there people from MACV going on these trips, as briefers or guides?

GARRITY: There were some military escorts, but essentially they were briefed at each stop along the way. They went to places like Nha Trang, Gha Nang, and a trip out to the Enterprise. So it was a very quick and frenetic kind of trip.

There was a wonderful incident, and I think it was either outside of Na Trang, or outside of Da Nang. I think it was outside of Na Trang, near the village that was famous for the fish sauce, Nuoc Man. We were on a bridge, and Romney was having a conversation with a Vietnamese peasant. Neither one of them was being translated accurately to the other, with the idea that neither one would have been able to make any sense out of what the other was saying because of the cultural barrier.

Q: So they literally talked by each other?

GARRITY: Exactly!

Q: Is that one of the incidents that Romney cited as an example for being brainwashed?

GARRITY: It had to be, along with, again, one of the incidents where he did all the talking. The idea of having 20% of the nation's governors in Vietnam at one time was quite extraordinary.

Q: So, a lot of the time the governors would address the accompanying press, rather than anybody else?

GARRITY: That's right. Quite often it was a conversation between the visitor and the press.

Q: Were they critical of what was going on in Vietnam at that time?

GARRITY: I think most of them were there to find out what was going on, because they really weren't very well informed. That was really typical of most visitors; they really did come there to find out what was happening. Some of them realized that in four days they couldn't find out much; others felt that they had learned everything during that time. But the typical visit, for a VIP of that nature, would be the four-day visit, after which they would become expert.

Q: During some of these visits, where you were press escort, did you actually come under fire? Or how close did you come to fire? I know nobody wanted to expose VIP's to any hazards, but how close did you come?

GARRITY: The only time I really can recall was when I was escorting John Steinbeck, who was probably one of the most illustrious of the correspondents we had; we very seldom got prize winners of that sort. He was visiting in Tay Ninh, where Don Besom was the field rep. When we were taking off from Tay Ninh, going back to Saigon, the chopper suddenly made some rather strange, sharp movements. The pilot told us afterwards the reason for it was we were being shot at.

Q: Did you feel that actually in the chopper?

GARRITY: We knew something was happening; Steinbeck was quite delighted by the whole thing.

Q: So he could say that he was actually there when it happened?

GARRITY: Right. I was just delighted nothing worse than that happened.

Q: Bob, we've all heard these stories about Barry Zorthian, and the Hickman story reminds me - and I want to ask you - before you left Vietnam, did Barry ever ask you to extend?

GARRITY: Oh, very definitely. We had set up a schedule that involved getting back to Boston for a wedding, which because of the date meant that we would actually extend an additional month in Saigon. So I figured that was good reason to be able to leave gracefully; but I reminded him weekly that I was leaving. At that time I was serving as Press Attaché^{1/2} to Ambassador Lodge; and a sort of liaison between Barry Zorthian and the Ambassador. It wasn't until the week before, he finally said, "You can't leave."

I said, "I have to. We've got everything booked, and we're ready to go. The lease is up in Bangkok, and there's no way. We've already extended for an additional month."

He was very angry with me at that time. We were good friends afterwards, but he was not happy to see me go.

Q: You said you were Press Liaison to Ambassador Lodge. That implies that during your tour of duty, you'd been in the JUSPAO Press Center as Assistant Press officer; you were a Publication Officer; you went back into the press business as a liaison. What other jobs did you hold, that you had to do while you were there?

GARRITY: Those were the three. The third job was for about a year; the last year I was there, working with the Ambassador, handling his press affairs.

Q: You were not a Vietnamese speaker, I take it?

GARRITY: That's right.

Q: You were in the Publication section.

GARRITY: That's right.

Q: What did you publish, and what was it all about?

GARRITY: We published a series of pamphlets, inserts in magazines. The Agency had a number of magazines that were published in Vietnam, in Vietnamese - also some in English. But we did a series of pamphlets on various events, or situations, or developments in Vietnam, to try to explain to the Vietnamese readers what was happening; particularly positive developments, encouraging agriculture, encouraging pacification, so forth and so on.

Q: What would be a press-run for a publication?

GARRITY: Oh, it was way in the tens of thousands; I'd have to go back.

Q: I'm just looking for magnitude. With all that paper, and we used to have a saying in Vietnam, "We could have papered Vietnam over, with everything that was printed there." Who would be the consumers, in terms of your outlets for distribution?

GARRITY: The field rep offices. These pamphlets would go out to their offices, and they would deliver them to various villages, or readers they felt would benefit by reading them. The material was quite varied. I remember there was a refugee group, who was transported from Da Nang to Na Trang, in some sort of barge. During the course of the trip, which was maybe an overnight, a woman on the barge gave birth to a baby. The baby was given the Vietnamese name for Phoenix. The connotation, which in Vietnam wasn't that different from the old Egyptian legend of rising from the ashes. The phoenix, of course, is one of the four great animal symbols. So this became material for a story to be put into a pamphlet.

Another time we took a couple of Vietnamese high school students out to the carrier Enterprise. And we gave them a day on board; met with the Captain, steered the ship, and then came back and appeared on radio and t.v. Of course, that became the subject of a pamphlet, also.

Q: Would you explain how this worked? Take the barge story; who wrote it, who actually got the story, how did it come to you, what happened? Did it go into a translation to Vietnamese, who did the translating, who did the checking? And where was the printing done?

GARRITY: We had some American writers assigned to do nothing but write stories. As Assistant Publications Officer, I did go out and develop stories, and I did write some stories myself. These would then be translated by our Vietnamese staff. The actual printing would be done in Manila, at the Regional Service Center.

Q: So what was the time lag, from the conception of a story, to its distribution to the field reps?

GARRITY: Probably several months.

Q: So you couldn't do any quick reaction, basically. There was always considerable lead time?

GARRITY: That's right, these were stories that would conceivably have a longer kind of shelf-life.

Q: Were there also quick-reaction types of material put out?

GARRITY: The wireless file, but that was part of the Information Division, not specifically under Publications. That was circulated, and items which would be more important would be reproduced in greater numbers, and circulated.

Q: Do you recall how many writers there actually were for your section?

GARRITY: It was a pretty big section. I think maybe there were a couple of officers assigned to do nothing but write. We had at least one full-time photographer, who was Vietnamese. The editors, and translators, and so forth, were Vietnamese with professional experience. Then there was the Publications Officer, and Assistant Publications Officer. We reported to the Information Officer, who was David Briggs at that time. He was eventually replaced by Clyde Hess, just as I got transferred back down to the Press Office for the job with Ambassador Lodge.

Q: Robert, when you were still an Assistant Press Officer, and going on press tours, describe a little of what an ordinary day was like. What was involved in setting up a press tour?

GARRITY: The JUSPAO Press Center was a unique operation. We had some military assigned to the Press Office, usually headed by a Navy captain, or an Army or Air Force colonel - rank. And then a staff. These people would try to set up logistics for getting correspondents out and around the country, to various places.

If you were up in Pleiku and a correspondent came in, and had an interest that we felt that you could respond to, we could then go to the military and say, "Would you set this journalist up with a trip to Pleiku, to see Pat Nieburg?" And they would handle the logistics.

The only problem was they all got to work at 7:00 or 7:30 in the morning, when there were no correspondents around. And their day officially ended between 4:30 and 5:00. 5:00, of course, was when the daily news briefing took place - "The 5 o'clock follies". So we tried to plead with them to change their schedule, and they were very sympathetic, but they couldn't get permission from the military command, because that was the military day.

So the only way we managed to get late-breaking logistics set up was if these military logistics folks would stay behind, and just work overtime. Otherwise, they'd all be gone just at the time when all the correspondents were there, looking for help.

Q: But basically, for them, it was business as usual, as they had done in the barracks back home?

GARRITY: That's about it. For the rest of us - we'd get in there about 8:00, and we got out of there at 8:00 at night if we were very lucky. This was pretty much six to seven days a week. Of course, there was a briefing every day at 5:00. It was a very full day. If you got in early, at 8:00, which is what you tried to do, you'd get a chance to get ahead of your paperwork - figure out who was coming, and who was to do what. You had a resident press corps, which in 1966 and 1967 was about 600 full-time foreign correspondents. I'd say half of them were American, and the other half were from all over the world.

In addition to that, you had a number of visiting correspondents, from various countries, including the U.S. We had some pretty unusual people. For instance, we had the Archduke Otto Von Hapsburg visit. When we asked him how we should address him, he said, "Archduke will do." He came in as a correspondent for the Indianapolis Star, and we outfitted him with fatigues, and boots, and sent him off into the jungle.

Q: Did the correspondents have to pay for these goodies?

GARRITY: The transportation was courtesy of the Army, and any kind of equipment the correspondent would pay for if he could. Sometimes there was no way to pay for it. For instance, one of the more infamous instances of this was a visit by Mary McCarthy. Mary McCarthy had nothing to wear out into the field, so she was the recipient of a whole outfit from one of our colleagues - Rube Munson, who shared an office with me. He saw his fatigues and his boots next when he saw her picture in Time Magazine. She was wearing Rube's outfit. I guess she took it back with her as a souvenir.

Q: Did the correspondents make a lot of demands on you, including trips to the PX. How did you handle that?

GARRITY: Well, the correspondents were always trying to get people to buy things for them. Generally, they received enough of an allowance from their own organizations, that they could take care of whatever they needed. Anything you wanted was available in Saigon, if you could pay for it; and generally, they had enough money to pay for things.

I'm sure they did get a few things from the PX, but then again the PX was somewhat overrated as a source of gifts and treasures. As I recall, if you wanted to buy tennis shoes, during a good part of my time in Vietnam, you couldn't do so unless you wore size 8 narrow. Somebody had ordered 10,000 pairs of one size; and they couldn't order any others until those were sold! They're probably still trying to get rid of them on the black market in Saigon.

Q: Were all the military PXs, clubs, and so forth open to correspondents?

GARRITY: They certainly had the clubs open to them. The famous one on top of the Rex Hotel, where JUSPAO had its headquarters.

Q: You must have run into some strange characters, especially amongst the resident correspondents. What kind of demands did they make on you, on a daily basis?

GARRITY: Constant demands. Of course, one of the most cantankerous ones, who's not with us anymore, was a correspondent for the New York Daily News, and also for Mutual Radio, Joe Freid. Joe Freid would come into your office, and go through your in-and-out boxes. It didn't matter whether you were sitting there or not. If you weren't there he'd probably go through the drawers, too! His famous line was, "What'd ya got?", hoping that somebody would have something that would result in a story.

I remember one time another correspondent was sitting in my office; he had made an appointment - Ray Coffee, who was working for the Chicago Sun Times. Joe Freid burst into the office, and started in with, "What'd ya got?" and going through the boxes.

And Ray Coffee stood up, and said, "Freid, if you don't get out of here, I'm going to punch you out!" So Freid left.

Q: Well, Freid was a well-known character around Saigon. I think he never moved out of the city, actually.

GARRITY: Nobody could remember any time when he left Saigon. And whenever confronted with this, he'd say he had to file so regularly that he couldn't afford to be out of the city.

Q: Well, when you got in, in the morning for example; would you have access to cables from embassy on what was going on? How were you briefed? How could you actually stay up to date with what was going on, even in country?

GARRITY: Well, of course with all of the correspondents running around, there was a limit on what we could have available for ourselves. I remember the great ploy that Harold Kaplan used when he briefed. He carried a huge book marked classified, with a red stripe and white letters. It really impressed all the correspondents that he was supposed to be quoting from this huge book of classified information. But truthfully, most of the classified information was kept upstairs, beyond the Marine guards. We were supposed to get up there as often as we could - at least once during the day; hopefully once in the morning, and once in the afternoon, to check on what was incoming and even what was outgoing, that we may have missed.

Q: How would you keep up, for example, with what was going on in the field? Did you have access to field reps' reports? If a correspondent wanted to go out in the field, and asked you, "Hey, where's the action?", how could you advise them?

GARRITY: The biggest asset I had, in this regard, was having my wife in Bangkok. The Bangkok connection proved to be the most helpful thing for me, and to many, many correspondents. I was able to meet so many field reps, because of their dependents being in Bangkok.

I remember the first Christmas, Joe and Carolyn Forte had a party, and the wives were all introducing the husbands to each other, because so many hadn't met; they were posted all over the country. As a result of getting to know all of these field reps, when they came in to Saigon, they would always stop in my office. As a matter of fact, I got to visit a lot of them at various times during my stay in Vietnam, on one occasion or another. We developed relationships such that I was able to send really qualified correspondents; correspondents who were serious, and could do a good job, out to see a representative situation, and talk to a reliable, intelligent representative of ours, in almost any part of the country.

It was really because of the Bangkok connection that I was able to do that.

Q: Did you feel, when you were doing it, that you were manipulating the press?

GARRITY: No, because I found that our JUSPAO field reps had the best handle, the most accurate grasp of what was going on, in Vietnam. There's no question about that. And I felt that a most important job for us, was telling the story of what was happening in Vietnam. And to the best of my ability, I tried to put correspondents together with responsible individuals, who were in strategically important parts of the country, and who could discuss what was happening in their area.

Q: From your experience, Robert, and knowing so many of the field reps personally, you must have had a feel that many of them were doubtful, critical of some phase or the other. So you were taking a deliberate risk, if you will, in having the correspondent exposed to that kind of reaction by field reps. What kind of feedback did you get from the correspondents?

GARRITY: The correspondents, to my way of thinking - always certainly the intelligent ones - always appreciated being able to get a frank picture, with a good amount of candor about what was happening in Pleiku, or Da Nang, or Hue, or down in the Delta.

Q: Did anyone ever hold you responsible for the lousy story that came out of this correspondent, who talked to this field rep?

GARRITY: No, if it happened to anyone else, I don't know, but I certainly never had any problem myself. There was so much information available in Vietnam that no correspondent was without material to file.

In fact, most correspondents that I knew, including television correspondents, filed far more material than ever was used. So the coverage of the war in Vietnam was largely decided by editors back in the United States.

For example, CBS News - T.V. - would send back at least 20 stories a week. And at that time, the mid-'60s, on the CBS Evening News, they were using a Vietnam story - four times out of five - for the evening broadcasts. They probably upped that to a Vietnam story every day later on. But they were choosing four stories, out of 20 that were filed. If somebody ever complained that they should have covered something else, they probably found out that they had; but when it got back to New York, it was an editorial decision on the part of the network not to use it, or to use it.

Q: Much of the coverage, though, was military action. But as we both know, there were tremendously important civilian developments; anything from black market, to a certain amount of pacification - where agriculture resumed, or dropped out. Was there a contradiction between, for example, what the JUSPAO field reps told the correspondents, and what the military told them? Was that a problem?

GARRITY: Well, it wasn't so much a contradiction. The military stories were so specifically military that there was no way of contradicting. The field rep would look at the situation from a psychological point of view, a sociological point of view, the political situation, the economic situation, and so forth. So they were commenting, overall on what was the basic thing that was going on in a province at a particular time. Whereas, the military brief would talk about a specific strike, or a specific military incident - how many were killed, how many captured, so forth.

Q: It becomes, ultimately, a judgment. What is the security of a certain province if there are some differences of opinion, between, say, the civilian assessment and the military?

GARRITY: Well, there probably were. I don't think, somehow, that these found their way into print, in a way that would make a pattern; which is probably unfortunate. There's no question that correspondents in Vietnam did cover pacification stories, or non-military stories; it wasn't that they weren't covered. We all felt, while we were there, that these were terribly important. There was a lot of incredible effort put into making a story available for coverage, and promoting revolutionary development, and democratization, and so forth. But these were covered by the correspondents. If they did not appear in hometown newspapers, or on network television, this was an editorial decision made in the U.S.; not one made by the reporters in Saigon, or wherever they were in Vietnam.

Q: So what you're really telling me is that the correspondents were pretty conscientious in covering the whole spectrum, but that the gate-keepers back home filtered out what they considered to be the sexy, or appealing stories; and that is what influenced the reporting of the Vietnam War?

GARRITY: If something had a specially sexy kind of angle to it, and was non-military, then it could get covered. For instance, there was a school in Vung Tau - which is a very pretty resort, or formerly a resort area, on the coast.

Q: It was also called Cap St. Jacques.

GARRITY: Yes, east of Saigon. There was a School of Revolutionary Development Cadres, which is a mouthful. But what this translated into was training young Vietnamese to go into villages, somewhat like a Peace Corps group, to try to develop projects and to make life better for the villagers. They were not specifically supposed to be engaged in warfare; they were supposed to be doing Peace Corps type work. And it was a very badly kept secret that the school was run by the CIA.

Until one Sunday, we'd had very little coverage of the Revolutionary Development Cadres. But it happened to be a slow weekend, and so a reporter whose name is quite well-known - with the New York Times, Johnny Apple, wrote a story about the training school at Vung Tau, and that it was run by the CIA. Well, that produced a front-page story; it was the bottom of the front page, but nevertheless, front page in the Sunday Times. As the story goes, when the President saw that story, the school was immediately transferred from CIA sponsorship to what we now call AID.

Q: Wasn't that also the school that had some input by Frank Scotten, and Ed Baumgartner? So there was more to it than just the Peace Corps; they were also taught ambushes, and village defense, and the emphasis was more on that than on the Peace Corps aspect?

GARRITY: There were two aspects. In fact, I believe there were two different kinds of cadres; one was more of a Peace Corps variety, and then there was another that specialized in what you might call hit-squad tactics. They all wore black pajamas; it was hard to tell them apart, which was maybe unfortunate for those who were doing strictly pacification work.

Q: You were always great in absorbing the humor of a situation. Do you recall any of the jokes, the humor that went around-Saigon during the time you were there? Some of the black humor, too, at ourselves?

GARRITY: I have a terrible memory for jokes. Maybe some will come to me along the way. There was an incredible amount of humor, and a lot of writing of song lyrics to well-known melodies, describing the situation.

Q: Do you remember something called the Turtle Club?

GARRITY: Turtle Club?

Q: You became a turtle if you were willing to stick your neck out. There was the Bob Delaney club, primarily started by the field reps; those who were willing to speak up and stick their necks out.

Let's go for a second to your job with Ambassador Lodge. He was a legend, in a sense. How did you get assigned to it, and what was your actual function?

GARRITY: As I recall, the person who had the job before me didn't have a very happy relationship with Lodge's office, or with Lodge himself. And Lodge had requested someone else. Zorthian set up three candidates for the job, and I was one of them. I was interviewed by the Ambassador, and was selected by him for the job.

The idea was that I would sit down with him every day at 12:30, and we would go over anything that had appeared in the press that he had participated in, or upcoming press plans that would involve him. The Ambassador was not anxious to be continually in the press, or continually giving press conferences. But on a selected basis, he was happy to do so. And he was, I found, very effective at doing so. I would talk with Barry Zorthian beforehand, and afterwards, to be sure it was something he thought was important.

For instance, the New York Times had approached the Ambassador, and Barry, for a sort of round table interview, giving an overview of the whole situation for the past year or so. And the Ambassador wasn't awfully sure he wanted to do this; it was a very time consuming thing. But we did convince him it was important, and he did do the interview.

In fact, I'll never forget it because I had to have five different secretaries type up the transcript; four of the secretaries were terrific, but the fifth one happened to work in Lodge's outer office. His inner office was manned by the incredible Eva Kim, who is probably the greatest secretary who ever lived. But the outer office was manned by someone else, and she gave to me the last of her section; what I didn't realize was a couple of pages had fallen under her desk. Lodge was very anxious to see this transcript, because this was going to be a big spread in the New York Times. The transcript was about 20 pages long. We were going through it, and there were three pages missing. At that point I had no idea where they were; I'd even forgotten which secretary had done which section.

He said, "Where are those?"

I said, "Well, I'll have to find them."

He turned to me, and said, "Bob, I just know this is an example. You want me to take care of the details, and you want to think about the big things. But I want you to take care of the details, and leave the big thoughts to me." He was so delighted having said that. Then I went out and found the missing pages.

Q: Tell me, how did you prepare for the 12:30 meeting with Lodge?

GARRITY: I usually would talk to Barry, and to Jack Stuart, who was the director of the Press Center. We had a pretty good idea of what we wanted Lodge to be aware of, and which requests came in. We didn't want to overwork him, but on certain occasions it was necessary to put him before the camera.

For instance, NBC wanted to do an interview, and he agreed to do it. We set this up in Barry Zorthian's office. As I recall, Barry took a field trip that day, so the Ambassador had the use of this office. This was a fairly new reporter, and the interview wasn't going terribly well. Of course, this was in the days before video tape, so there was a 16-mm camera grinding away. The reporter was talking to Lodge about B-52s being used by the U.S. against an enemy that would hide in the water, and breathe through a bamboo shoot, and how could we ever put the two together?

The Ambassador was just not answering the question. So at one point the reporter said, "Stop the camera." He turned to me and said, "Bob, would you please explain to the Ambassador what my question is, so that I can get an answer?"

So I said, "Mr. Ambassador, I think what he wants you to comment on is the idea that we're trying to kill a gnat with a cannon."

And he said, "Oh, well," and he gave an answer. I can't quote it, but he was fun to work with. He just didn't cotton to the reporter. We got along very well.

Q: Barry Zorthian was known during his "reign," to play the top echelon very close to his vest. Whether it was his colleagues in JUSPAO, or with the press, Barry was the tsar. What was your relationship with Barry? This must have been a very delicate kind of relationship with Barry? You have the triangle of the ambassador, Barry, and Garrity.

GARRITY: Barry himself said, "You're a lightning rod." He called me the lightning rod, and he said any time there was a lot of electricity, I was the one who was going to get shocked.

Q: One of the things that Barry was known to hog was information. To what degree did he share with you, so your relationship with the ambassador could be a satisfactory one? Or to what degree were you left defenseless, for lack of information?

GARRITY: I don't feel that I was privy to nearly all of what I should have known, but I guess it was a matter of keeping your eyes and ears open. That's how Barry got his information.

Q: But that means, in a sense, that you must have spent a good bit of your time trying to attempt end-runs to get at information, which you probably could have spent more profitably otherwise.

GARRITY: Well, that's true, but it didn't seem to me - at the time, at least - to be an overwhelming problem. So much was happening, and information became so quickly outdated. And really, Lodge's role with the press was not to talk about very specific things, but more the overall trend. And he himself was much more in touch with the political feeling of the situation.

He would say, "What this country needs is a good police force." He said, "You know, if you're out in a village, and somebody tries to murder you, there's no police!" He had kind of a New England sense of - if we just had some town meetings, and got these things going, this would all work out a lot better. I think he felt more comfortable analyzing the political side of it, than the military.

Q: As a person, Lodge was very imperial. Was that a problem, vis-a-vis the press? It wasn't easy to cotton up to Henry Cabot Lodge.

GARRITY: It's very interesting; he was very tough on his senior officers, but he was very kind to his junior officers. And personally, I found he was very kind to me. With the press, when you finally set up an appointment, he was very good; he would be a good interview. The one correspondent that always could get in to him, without ever going through anyone - outside of Lodge - was Joe Freid. And nobody could ever figure out - I'm not sure even Barry knew the real answer - to what was responsible for Joe Freid's access to Lodge; but he certainly had it. It was an odd combination.

Q: Do you have any feeling of what the relationship was between Lodge and Bunker?

GARRITY: They succeeded each other; Lodge was gone when Bunker arrived. Part of my agreement, and part of my timing, was that I would be there for Bunker's first week; so I was there for Bunker's first week, and that was quite a week!

Q: When interviews were requested, were they of the generic type, that somebody wanted to see the ambassador? Or were these interviews often tied to specific events, or developments in the war in Vietnam?

GARRITY: They tended to be more generic, or very broad kinds of developments. The other kinds of developments were tactical matters, better addressed to the military. So he would talk about things on a broader basis. For instance, when Joe Alsop came to town, he always had to see the ambassador, naturally.

In fact, a funny situation happened one day. I had a call from a weeping secretary, from Lodge's office - I believe the same one that lost my three pages - saying, "Bob, you've got to help me!"

And I said, "What's wrong?"

She said, "I just had a call from Mr. Alsop, and he's having lunch with the ambassador, but he doesn't know whether he's the guest or the host."

I said, "Well, why don't you ask the ambassador?"

She said, "He's all tied up in a meeting, and I can't get in to him. And Mr. Alsop won't speak to me anymore." So I called Alsop at his hotel, and I said I was the press attaché^{1/2}.

He said, "I don't speak with press attaché^{1/2}s."

So I said, "You'd better speak to this one, or you won't have any lunch!"

I explained the situation to him, and he said, "If it's that much up in the air, then I'll be the guest and Cabot can be the host.," So he went off to Lodge's for lunch and Lodge never knew about the exchange.

There were so many notables who rolled through town. Every Thursday evening Barry Zorthian had a backgrounder in his living room; and the press was just unbelievable. We'd have Chet Huntley, or Walter Cronkite. Every week there would be several world famous correspondents sitting among a group of 20 or so - corps correspondents that he wanted to really give as much access as possible.

Q: Did you attend any of these backgrounders?

GARRITY: Oh yes.

Q: Who would be present, other than the correspondent from the USIA contingent? Yourself, and who else?

GARRITY: Barry usually had a guest. He might have the Secretary of Defense as a guest, because there were so many visitors. If there were no visitors, he would always have Phil Habib, who was the Minister Counselor for Political Affairs, at that time, at the embassy. Every week, there was a chance for the correspondents to talk about what had been going on during the previous week.

The mixture would be the top resident foreign press, and any notable visitors. You know, the New York Times would always be here. Time and Newsweek would always be there. CBS, ABC, and BC were always there. Washington Post would always be there. Wire services would be there. It was very informal, and it was, I think, very much appreciated as a chance for the correspondents to have background access. This was not for attribution; these were on background. And yet, it was intended to be educational, and helpful for the correspondents.

Q: During sessions of that sort, did they address the political situation?

GARRITY: Every aspect of the situation; I don't think anything was not covered.

Q: During your time in Saigon, Robert, there were several scandals, which permeated. I think of a Navy captain who was running either the clubs or the PX's. Did things of that nature come to the surface?

GARRITY: If whoever was the guest that week knew anything about it. Generally, that kind of thing would be referred back to the military spokesman, for comment. Of course, they were doing their own investigation, and so forth.

Q: How about discussions of the Vietnamese government? General Ky, General Chou - their capabilities, or incapacibilities? Much of the problem we had at that strata was with the government, and the possibility that it could function effectively. These things were discussed I take it?

GARRITY: Not so much in terms of the personalities involved, as in terms of U.S. desires, or U.S. objectives. And I think it was felt that if these objectives got out, they would be read by the personalities. But the backgrounders were not engaging in any kind of character analysis, or assassination, or whatever.

Q: To what degree did you experience that the embassy, or JUSPAO used - and I say this in quotation marks - the press to put pressure, let's say, on the Vietnamese, for whatever reason? Either to be more aggressive in their military operations, to institute reforms that would capture the hearts and minds. Do you have any feel for that aspect of the operation?

GARRITY: I think just by telling the story of the ongoing process - coverage of the kinds of things you're talking about - naturally were followed by the Vietnamese government. Now whether briefings on these developments were made only so that coverage could be generated, which would influence the Vietnamese government, or whether they were influenced in the process of telling the story .

I think that JUSPAO's role seemed to be telling the story both ways - internally in Vietnam, and externally to the rest of the world. It was certainly a unique thing for USIA to be involved in, because although we deal with American press, and other foreign press at whatever post we're at, our prime responsibility is usually the domestic press in whatever country we are then stationed in.

And of course, we had a liaison with the Vietnamese press, in Vietnam. But this huge press center was engaged in talking to the foreign press - American and the rest of the world. Of course, we brought a lot of press - sponsored a lot of journalists to come to Vietnam, to supposedly learn about the war. And I think that our whole purpose was to be as open as possible, and generate as much information as possible.

Q: If I'm not mistaken, Bob, there was also a Vietnamese press briefing regularly, or irregularly, almost catty-corner from where JUSPAO's press center was?

GARRITY: That would precede the 5:00 follies.

Q: To what degree did you ever steer the press in that direction?

GARRITY: Some of the press attended it, but they didn't find it very useful, as I recall. The general view of the correspondents was that the Vietnamese briefing was either too far behind the curve, or not willing to be as open as the American briefing would be.

Q: Bob, in retrospect now, we've read a lot about Vietnam since we've been out of there. We've had a lot of comments from reporters going back. And one of the charges that has always been hurled at us who were participants in those years, is that we were lying; the U.S. government wasn't telling the truth. How do you feel about it now?

GARRITY: In all of the time I was at JUSPAO, whether it was in publications or in the press center, there was no known lying going on. Certain developments the mission wanted emphasized; you know, pacification, the non-military side of the war, which was very important.

And the fact is that in a country with very little democratic institution, some grass roots notion of democracy was beginning to catch on, and bear some fruit. As we know later, when Vietnam fell, that was one of the great tragedies, that some of the work that had been done, had been effective, and left behind people who were doomed because they had participated and become democratic, and had taken on these rather strange notions for their culture - of man deciding his own fate, and being his own individual, and having his own vote.

But as far as lying to the press at that foreign press center, if there was any ever done it was by omission of fact and with the feeling that certain information had to be withheld for the safety of the troops. I know the approach on the part of JUSPAO was always "when in doubt, tell it." It's more important to get the story out. So JUSPAO was always pushing for publicizing the story, getting the story out. And sometimes, I think, it was resented by the military for that reason.

Q: Did the protests that occurred, not that infrequently - especially by the Buddhist monks - have an impact on your work? I remember going to a protest meeting, where the monks were in a pagoda, and nothing really happened until television arrived there. Was that a problem for you? How did we handle internal protests against the Vietnamese government?

GARRITY: It was covered just like anything else. The journalists generally would find a way to cover it themselves. If they didn't, or weren't able to, or wanted some analysis of what was going on, we had people in-house who could talk about Buddhist affairs, or what they were protesting, without perhaps making a judgment on it - to get the facts together for the correspondents.

We did an awful lot of backgrounding; we had people like Doug Pike, who knew so much about the Viet Cong. We would save people like Doug for especially able journalists, who really could digest, and employ that kind of background information in their coverage. The emphasis in that case was not to propagandize, but to really project an accurate picture. Quite often somebody would take the accurate picture, and draw a negative conclusion; and many of these negative conclusions were well-drawn. But I think Barry Zorthian, and so many of us, always felt that the chips had to fall where they would; but the most important thing was to get the real story out.

Q: To what degree, Bob, did we get information from the press that we didn't get otherwise? To what degree was the learning process reversed? Did we learn things from the press we might not have found out otherwise?

GARRITY: Certain of the correspondents - certainly the Neil Sheehans, and the Malcolm Browns - were exceptionally active, and able in following the story for a long time; either in books that they wrote, or articles and so forth, and they themselves became historians of the war.

In that sense, the fact that they used continuity - long time assignments, repeat assignments; the kind of continuity where they knew all the characters, and they knew all the developments, and they really became tremendous sources of information themselves. Vietnam was a situation where, in fact, you would use correspondents to brief other correspondents, simply because they knew so much.

Q: In retrospect, how do you evaluate the work that USIA did in Vietnam?

GARRITY: I would give USIA's performance in Vietnam very high marks. Certainly the result in Vietnam was not a very happy one, and there are a lot of reasons for that. I don't think USIA was one of them. I think that USIA's role, and what USIA did in Vietnam, was perhaps one of the few positive programs; one that really took into account the people of Vietnam, as well as the American audience. And one that was ultimately done in by other policies. The agency has always wanted a chance to be in on the take-off, as Murrow said; and always wanted to be part of the action. Here, they were part of the action, but ultimately the policies, and the approach followed in waging the war was simply a matter beyond USIA's control.

I would say that if there was a real element of honesty in the whole effort, stemmed from what USIA was trying to do. I found that USIA was probably well-known now, largely because of Barry Zorthian, who was responsible for the lack of censorship in the war. If there had been censorship, with the same kind of policy, we might have been in much worse shape.

Q: You made an interesting observation, that we were part of the action. Should we have been that much involved - as actors - rather than being more like the press was - the observers; and putting out the story that way. You know, following, but as a good American instinct of doing - rather than thinking, and reflecting, and interpreting, which should maybe have been JUSPAO's role. We were part of the war, rather than the observers who could interpret. If we had it to do over again, would or should we do the same thing?

GARRITY: I certainly hope we would never get in a situation like that again. It was an ill-begotten war. It was badly conceived, badly carried out, and it's no surprise to me, at least, that it ended up the way it did. I think whether USIA was playing a part or not, it would have ended up the same way. Whether we should have had field reps in provinces, liaising between the Vietnamese province chiefs and the American military commanders - I think those were not always very pleasant jobs. But perhaps these were some of the few voices of sanity in the situation. It may have been a lot worse without the influence of our JUSPAO field reps.

It's hard to say whether we should have done it, because, in fact, we did do it; it might have been worse without it. I think the policies that were applied were policies that ignored a great deal of wisdom and background knowledge, of the kind that USIA acquired during its experience in Vietnam; when we did have all the field rep expertise, and the information that came from these field reps about the real situation of security, the political complexion, what is going on in a particular province. I think if that information had been better employed, we might have had a different kind of situation.

Q: Robert, again in retrospect, what did the Vietnamese experience do for, or to, you and your family?

GARRITY: The first thing it did was separate us for the first time, and I think there are still a few scars from that. It's very difficult with young children. But then again, there were a lot of people in the same boat, so it's hard to say you feel sorry for just yourself. It was a situation that was not easy.

Certainly the experience of being there, and what I learned about the world, and other cultures, is something that will remain with me forever. I'm not sure how I can ever employ this to the benefit of U.S. policy again, now that I'm retired.

I read today, in the New York Times' science section, that psychiatrists have made the remarkable discovery that cultural differences account for the need for different kinds of psychiatric treatment, for different kinds of psychiatric problems. It's as if science has suddenly discovered something they never knew before; that there are essential, cultural differences between East and West, and North and South. Something, I think, almost anyone who has had a career in USIA's foreign service should - or ought to know.

Q: What did it do to Joanne, and the children? Have they ever reflected on it? Have there been complaints about the times you have been separated?

GARRITY: I think my wife had to become very independent in handling the situation.

End of interview